

Dyonna Starr-Ramos

“A Family Through the Eyes of Time”

A Creative Nonfiction Memoir

Honors Thesis 2018

Our Happy Place

2001

“We’re almost there,” my dad said as we entered the small town of Sulphur, Oklahoma. My mom was sitting next to him, and my sister and I were in the backseat. It was still before noon, but the Oklahoma sun made the car feel like an oven, despite the air conditioner being cranked up to the highest notch.

After my dad parked, the four of us jumped out of the cramped confines of the car. It had only taken an hour and a half to get to Sulphur Springs, but it felt like forever. Sulphur Springs was a state park before it was renamed the Chickasaw National Recreation Area, making it a national park. More than that though, it was our favorite place.

We stretched our legs as we slathered on sunscreen and bug repellent. My mom and the camera around her neck were ready to see the trees, the flowers, the animals, and the streams. My sister and I, too young to appreciate nature, were ready to swim.

“Come on, you know we have to walk before we swim,” my mother chastised us as we stared longingly at the cool stream next to us. Her pale skin almost glowed in the sun where it wasn’t covered by her old t-shirt and shorts. I had inherited my mother’s paleness, while my dad and sister were on the tanner side.

“And Dyonna,” my mom added, pulling her thick brown hair into a low ponytail, “why don’t you take off that watch? You might lose it.”

“No!” I cried, clutching the lime green Shrek watch to my chest. “I want to bring it!”

She shrugged as she tried to tame my sister’s wild curly hair down, clearly not in the mood to argue. My platinum blond hair was straight, fine, and short, so she left it alone. She took my sister’s hand, and I took my dad’s, and then we headed out onto the hiking trails.

My mother and father always seemed the happiest when we were out, whether it was to the park, the zoo, or anywhere that wasn't home. Our house was a boxing ring, my parents were the boxers, and my sister and I were spectators. When I tried to referee for them, I only made things worse. There were too many chores left undone, too many money issues, too many half-finished arguments laying around, things I couldn't understand at the time. But on our trips to Sulphur, there was none of that to distract us. It was like the further away from home we were, the happier we could be. Almost.

My mom stopped frequently during the hike to take pictures of things she thought were beautiful: the tall, lush trees, the worn-down limestone rock, and, her favorite, crystal clear streams of water.

"Do you have to take more pictures?" my dad said impatiently. "This is probably the thousandth one you've taken today."

"It's water," she argued, gesturing toward the stream as if that changed everything. "It's pretty."

"I don't understand how you can take so many pictures of something that scares you," he told her.

"I'm only afraid of being in the water," she explained, turning the camera off. "I can't swim well. I don't want to drown."

We hiked down the trails until my sister and I wailed about how hot and tired we were, until we whined about jumping into the cold water, until my parents couldn't carry us any longer. Finally, we came to the underwater bridge. It was really just a wide slab of concrete on the ground, just barely covered by running water. On either side, the water was deep enough for us

to enjoy, but shallow enough for my sister and me to play without fear of drowning. I took off my Shrek watch and put it on the edge of the bridge for safe keeping before going to explore.

The rocks on the streambed dug into our feet, but it was a necessary evil. The water chilled our toes and fingers, a welcome reprieve from the beating sun. My mom sat on a rock on dry land, not even venturing her feet into the water in front of her. My dad stood knee-deep in the water, teaching us how to skip rocks. I always said my dad was a bear of a person, with his large stature and wild, bushy beard. However, when he skipped rocks, he was too peaceful for me to think of him as a bear.

When we were finally ready to head back to the car, tired and ready to go home, I went to retrieve my watch, but it was gone. The current might have swept it off the bridge, or someone could have knocked it over the side. My dad, ever the pessimist, told me someone had probably swiped it. Although the watch wasn't sentimental to me, I felt like I had lost something important that day.

2015

"We finally found it!" my mom exclaimed, stepping out from under the trees and onto the bridge. The water flowed gently under her new waterproof shoes. She had spent the last several years trying to find this particular patch without any luck, until today. My stepdad and I followed her onto the bridge.

During the final years of my parent's marriage, we had stopped coming to Sulphur. It wasn't until my mom got together with her new husband in 2008 that they resumed the trips here. My sister had lost interest in coming by this time, but I still tagged along.

“Is this really it?” my stepdad asked, looking skeptical. He adjusted the hat on his almost bald head, the wrinkles around his face crinkling up as he looked around. He was nineteen years older than my mom, but even at fifty-eight, he hiked the whole way with us.

“Yes!” she replied, turning the camera on. She pointed it at me to snap a picture.

“Dyonna, do you remember coming here as a kid?”

I looked over the smooth rocks under the water’s surface and examined the edge of the bridge. The last time I had been here was fifteen years ago. Now I was tall enough that I didn’t have to worry about falling in. My once blond hair was now red and almost as long as my mom’s. “Isn’t this where I lost my Shrek watch?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, looking around thoughtfully. “It is, isn’t it?”

I waded through the water, exploring the place now just as I had as a child. The rocks didn’t bother me like they used to when I was five. Whenever I found a particularly flat rock, I would try to channel my dad’s magic into skipping the rock, but I could never get it to bounce more than twice before it sank to the bottom.

My mom and stepdad were wading on the other side of the bridge, my mom gripping her camera as if her life depended on it. My mom’s hair was just as long as it had always been, and her skin was just as pale. There were a few new wrinkles in her face, but the biggest difference was she looked a lot happier than I remember.

They were talking about what to have for dinner as they casually made their way to the middle of the stream. She had never liked water very much, but my stepdad held her hand, providing support and balance for her any time she felt like she might fall. As I watched them, it suddenly occurred to me that Sulphur Springs wasn’t our place anymore, where we felt like a real family. Two of us were missing, and we had let in a stranger. My sister was at their house

two hours away, glued to her computer. My dad was at his own house, probably in the middle of his favorite TV show. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen him skip rocks.

I turned away from them and crushed my hands into the muddy streambed floor, shoving rocks and plants out of my way. It was impossible that a Shrek watch would still be here, but I couldn't stop myself from looking for it anyway.

Later, on the way home, my mom put up a picture of the spot and a lost sign on Facebook for the watch. "Missing: Green Shrek watch at this location in Sulphur, Oklahoma. When: 2001. Contact Dyonna Starr if found." I didn't tell my mom that the sign should really say: "Missing: Happy family of father, mother, and two daughters. Last seen: 2001."

The Difference in Grandmothers

When I was six years old, my parents went on a trip out of Oklahoma for a convention. My dad's mother, Meme, was supposed to watch me and my sister for four days, while my mom's mother, Donna, would watch us for three. For us, staying at Meme's longer was the best case scenario. Meme had a huge house, many dogs, a small town with lots of kids our age, including our cousin, and she always provided us with a lot of brand new toys. We were ecstatic.

The first day was wonderful. As my parent's car rattled up to the big house in Reydon, Oklahoma, Meme came outside to meet us. She was short, about five feet tall, including several inches of fluffy gray hair. It always reminded me of the ducks with the fluffy topped heads. She decorated her tanned skin with bright blue eye shadow, heavy mascara, and thick lipstick.

"Meme!" I cried, throwing the car door open so I could run into her arms. She only hugged me for a second before turning to my dad. "I have a case of the sniffles," she told him. "I'll try not to breathe on anyone too much."

After saying goodbye to my parents, we went inside to play with our cousin. Although he was a year younger than me, and a boy, he didn't mind playing with us as long as we weren't crying.

That night, Meme, as always, made an enormous meal of homemade mashed potatoes with thick white gravy, fresh rolls, steaming green beans, and a juicy pot roast from her ancient crockpot. I was always allowed to help her, and this time I had the honor of standing on a bar stool to mash the potatoes while she added milk, sour cream, and cheese to the bowl.

Later, we played with the big boxers and watched cartoons with our cousin in the back room. We might have even turned all the lights off and played hide and seek in the dark. Before bed, we fought over who would get to sleep on the bed and who would get the couch.

The next day, however, Meme shuffled out of her room groggy and cranky. Her sniffles from the day before had evolved into a full blown cold. With no makeup and no dentures in her mouth, she seemed like a shell of the woman she normally was. Instead of the usual breakfast of eggs, bacon, hashbrowns, sausage links, and her specialty, Indian fry bread, we had to make our own bowls of stale, soggy cereal. Even her husband, who spent ninety percent of every day in front of the TV chain-smoking cigarettes, was left to fend for himself.

While we munched on our disappointing breakfast, Meme picked up the phone and called our other grandmother. After a hushed conversation, she hung up and sat across from us at the bar. When we had slurped the last of the cereal-flavored milk from our bowls, she said, “I’m too sick to care of you, so your aunt is going to take you to your Grandma Donna’s today.”

I don’t really remember much between that moment and us piling into my aunt’s red car. I imagine we gathered our few belongings, petted the dogs one last time, and said goodbye to everyone, all through waterfalls of tears. Meme’s husband probably yelled at us for whining, Meme probably lay down before my aunt even arrived, and my cousin was probably hiding out waiting to get rid of us. Two crying girls was not something a five-year-old boy was well equipped to handle.

I do remember sitting in the back of my aunt’s car, staring out the window at the empty, dry landscape, with the occasional patch of trees and mountain-like hills. My sister sat on the leather seat facing away from me, still sniffing and wiping her eyes. This was only a brief reprieve from our all-out sob-fest. Just when my aunt started to think she could relax and enjoy her music, we would start up our wailing again. All it would take was a simple thought of the house we were leaving, or the house we were heading toward. Needless to say, it was a long two-and-a-half-hour drive to Verden, Oklahoma.

My dad's sister barely said a word to my Grandma Donna when she let us loose. The two sides of my family could not have been any more different, and they preferred to spend as little time acknowledging each other as possible.

Even visually, Donna and Meme were polar opposites. Donna's long, dark hair, only flecked with gray, was straight and fell down to her lower back. Her pale skin was smooth and makeup free, and all of her original teeth were still in her mouth.

For my sister and me, Donna's house was one of the last places on Earth we wanted to be, next to the dentist or the doctor. Her small, brick house was filled with shabby furniture my grandparents had had for years. The bright green couch in the living room had been there for as long as I could remember, and remained there many years later. Without a doubt, the worst part of her house was that it was just down the street from the graveyard in town. When I tried to sleep there, I could only imagine skeletons and ghosts rising from their graves to torment me.

"Let the girls have a turn with the TV," Donna chided my grandpa as she made our lunch a few minutes later. It was probably either ramen or sandwiches, the only thing she could manage to squeeze in before she had to go to work.

Of course, Donna didn't mind watching us, but she had to juggle her job at the post office with us hanging around. Although we had our grandpa there, he wasn't entirely reliable as a babysitter. He didn't play with us as much as we would have liked, nor was he able to cook in the same capacity as his wife. In this way, he was similar to Meme's husband, although he had a gentler, kinder personality.

Donna and my grandpa weren't as well versed in how to keep children occupied and happy. While Meme let us use her paints, or let me help her cook in the kitchen, Donna was afraid of us getting stains on her floor and her kitchen was too small for the both of us. Instead, I

remember being sat down in front of the TV to watch the entire Star Wars trilogy. My grandpa refused to miss this marathon, but my sister and I would have rather watched paint peel. To this day, I haven't been able to watch even one of those movies.

When Donna came back home from work that night, she made TV dinners for all of us with a cup of juice for me and my sister and a cup of coffee for her and my grandpa.

"Grandma, I wanna try coffee," I whined.

"You're not gonna like it," she warned me, sliding her cup across to me. She made her coffee black and bitter.

After I took a sip, I made a disgusted face and chugged my juice. "That's gross, why would you drink that?"

She laughed. "I think it's good, you doe-butt." While no one really understood what "doe-butt" meant, it was Donna's favorite term for her family members when she thought they were being funny.

I wish I could go back and tell my younger self that there were more important things in life than big houses, fancy meals, and new toys, but I wouldn't learn the things that truly mattered for a long time to come.

About fifteen years later, I called Donna to talk about this memory. She said, "I'm surprised you don't remember, but that wasn't the first time your Meme did something like that." When I called, Donna lived in a new house, in a new town, with her new husband. My grandpa had passed away six years ago, and her new husband made a lot of money. They now lived in the kind of house I would have loved as kid. A huge backyard sprawled outside, and their old Basset

Hound greeted everyone who came through the door. The kitchen was big enough that I could have helped cook, which I do now as an adult at every holiday.

According to Donna, if Meme had to keep us for more than two or three days, our visits were always cut short. Maybe I was too young to remember, or maybe I was more complacent. When I asked Donna if she had ever been angry at them for dropping us on her, she told me, “It made me mad, but not because I had to watch you. Even if I was sick or working, I would always make time for you.” It made her mad on my sister’s and my behalf, because she knew how much we enjoyed spending time with Meme. Aside from her location, Meme was always in a better position to watch us anyway. Neither Meme nor her husband worked, and my aunt was over all the time, so there was never a shortage of adults. My cousins were always around, so we had playmates and pets at all times. Theoretically, keeping us shouldn’t have been much of a problem at all. This was made all the worse because Donna lived less than an hour away from us, so we saw her all the time. In all my life, we have never seen Meme more than five or six times a year, at most. Meme’s house was like a rare treat for us, which served to make it that much more fun.

I would have asked Meme for her take on this story, but we haven’t been on speaking terms for more than two years, despite my father’s best efforts. As I grew older, I started to notice things about Meme that totally called into question my idolization of her. The time Meme stopped talking to a niece because she started dating an African-American man comes clearly to mind. She had a tendency to get extremely angry with me for even talking about my mom’s half of the family. In addition, she spoke badly about everyone and everything if they didn’t line up perfectly with her views. As I reached adulthood, I started to realize that everything I had loved about her was superficial – the house, the dogs, the toys. As I got older, I started to notice that I

was becoming a person she would have hated. If she had known I wasn't a Christian, or that I was a Democrat, or that my best friend was half-black, or that my future husband would be a Mexican whose mother was an illegal immigrant, my memories with her would have been very different.

Even when I was honest with Meme, if she didn't like it, she would bulldoze right over me. A year or two before we completely stopped talking, I remember a car ride with her, her turning around in the front seat to look at me.

"Dyonna, when you have kids, you should make sure that they learn an instrument," she suggested. As her wrinkles got bigger, her makeup only got heavier.

"I already told you I don't want kids, Meme," I reminded her, for what felt like the thousandth time. It was hard enough being fifteen and already having decided I didn't want kids. It felt like nearly everyone was telling me I was wrong or selfish.

"You'll change your mind," she assured me. "I really think you should teach them piano, or maybe the violin."

For the last several years, I have focused on making good memories with Donna. This last Christmas, she and I washed the dishes after our feast of crescent rolls, green bean casserole, juicy ham, and, her specialty, potato salad. I plugged the sink with the stopper to fill it with warm, soapy water.

"You've been together for a while now, huh?" she asked, setting a stack of plates down next to me. Over the kitchen counter, we could see her husband and my boyfriend chatting together on the couch.

"Yeah, almost four years," I replied.

“Do you still not want kids?” she wondered, loading the dishwasher with cups I handed her.

“Not even a little bit.” As I got older, I only moved further away from wanting children.

“Well, whatever makes you happy,” she told me, patting my back with her wet hand.

The best thing about her was that she was supportive of anything I wanted to do. She always stood up for me, never got mad at me for feeling a certain way, and she always told me never to listen to anyone else. For her, family meant supporting each other, even if we didn’t always agree with each other. These were the sorts of things I thought about when I wrapped my hands around the sink stopper and pulled on it.

“Grandma,” I said, frowning. “I think I broke your sink.”

“How do you break a sink?”

“If you’re me, you put the sink stopper in upside down,” I told her, biting my lip.

I was afraid she would be mad, but she just picked up a butter knife and said, “Move over, doe-butt. We’ll get it out of there.”

Trying to Forget

The church-turned-community-center-turned-funeral-hall was packed with people attending my cousin Jarod's funeral. For most of Jarod's life, he lived in two microscopic Oklahoma towns within twenty miles of each other. I was almost positive that nearly the entire populations of both Cheyenne and Reydon had come to say goodbye. Jarod was like that; it seemed like he could make friends with anyone. He had a booming laugh; his large stature balanced by the boyish, bowl-shaped haircut he had into adulthood; and blue eyes that radiated friendliness. There were only a few times I had ever seen Jarod truly mad, but he was always quick to forgive and rarely ever got violent (unless you count his brotherly rough-housing).

I sat in the fourth row of pews next to my dad and sister, three rows behind my aunt Susan, Jarod's mom, and his two brothers, Blake and Brace. Susan had tears streaming down her face, her face pressed into her husband's shoulder. The brothers stared resolutely at the ground, speaking very little to each other. Next to them was Heather, Jarod's fiancée. I don't remember what she was doing, just that she was in the first row. Behind them was my grandma Meme, her graying poofed up hair standing several inches off her head, heavy make-up smeared with tears.

We listened to a pastor give a speech about Jarod on the same stage where I had watched him accept his diploma only three years before. I noticed that the pastor studiously avoided anything about suicide, which was probably funeral protocol. He frequently brought up how Jarod must have gone to Heaven, how he was lovingly looking down on all of us. This bothered me, but only because during my occasional forced visits to the church here, I had listened to this same pastor preach that suicide was a one-way ticket to Hell. By this time, I was seventeen and probably the only atheist in the entire hall. I was certainly the only one in my family.

When I was thirteen, I told Brace, Jarod's younger brother, that I was an atheist. Since he was twelve, I thought that he would understand me better than the rest. That was horribly untrue. Even though he was a year younger than me, he yelled at me for an hour, told me that I had to try to become Christian again, that I was a sinner and I would go to hell for this. He promised not to tell anyone if I promised to find God again. Although I had never been religious to begin with, I promised for fear of everyone else's reactions, which undoubtedly would have been worse. Of course, this didn't change how I felt. It only made me secretive, withdrawn. I made up excuses to get out of going to church.

Back at the funeral, after the sermon came the slideshow. I alternated between watching the photos as they flashed across the screen and staring at the laminated boards beneath my sneakered feet. I also alternated between crying and, when I felt embarrassed about being seen, stone-faced staring.

Once the slideshow was over, everyone was ushered through the side door to get a look at the casket. It was an open casket funeral, for reasons I can't even begin to imagine. Open casket funerals were bizarre to me even when the deceased didn't have gaping holes in their foreheads.

As she reached the casket, Susan collapsed onto the polished wood, sobbing her heart out. I felt miserable for her, but most of my attention was focused on burying my feelings as deep as they would go. It had been three days since Jarod died, since my life had changed in the space of a few sentences. During this time, I had tried to forget anything about my cousin as often as I could.

When I stepped up to the casket, after my aunt had been escorted away by her husband, I only took one glance. My sweet-faced cousin lay there in a suit, tan skin pale and lips on the bluer side. A massive gunshot wound was still visible on his forehead as if to remind everyone

how he died. Not that anyone could forget. Someone had covered the gruesome wound with makeup, but the edges were still raw and angry.

I couldn't handle this sight of Jarod. I wanted my last image of him to be preserved, to be full of light and laughter and life. I could remember him, smiling hugely and waving at us from the driveway, one arm around his fiancée, as we drove away from him the last time. This pale, stiff thing with makeup and a suit and a gaping hole in his head didn't seem like the same person. I made a break for it, and rushed across the lawn. Grief is a weird thing, so no one mentioned my sudden exit to me that day. I spent several minutes alone behind the church, simultaneously trying not to throw up and feeling guilty for my reaction.

When the procession headed to the graveyard, my dad, sister, and I were the second or third car following the hearse. I spent the entire ride staring out the back window, watching the massive line of cars go up hills, around corners, run stop-signs and lights, while other cars pulled to the side of the road to let us pass. Only one car didn't pull over for us, and I vaguely remember my dad going on an angry tirade about how disrespectful they were and what a piece of scum they must have been.

After this, the only thing I remember is a blue tent and a huge crowd of onlookers. I wound my way through the crowd, making small talk with a few people I knew.

When the casket was lowered into the grave, his two brothers, his step-brother and stepfather, and two of his friends I barely knew were the pallbearers. This is all I remember about that day, and I have never once visited the grave since then, although we have driven by the cemetery almost every single time we visited my grandmother.

After his funeral, I refused to acknowledge any existence of Jarod. If asked direct questions about him or anything related to him by my family, I gave the best answer I could with as little contemplation as possible, and then I changed subjects. Luckily, I lived three hours away from his hometown and the rest of my dad's family, so I didn't have to fend them off very often. My way of coping with my grief was by not coping. If I didn't acknowledge Jarod's death, then I couldn't grieve about his passing.

There was only one night I allowed myself the full rites of mourning. It was raining outside, a few weeks after he died. It was also the day my goldfish died, and, in my grief over the fish, all that buried sadness broke through the dam.

When I called my dad, who was driving to his friend's house from work, to ask him where our shovel was, he said, "You're going to bury a fish?"

"Well, yeah, he deserves a proper rest," I answered. I had already nicely laid him out in a little box with a cotton cushion and padding.

"It would be a lot easier to flush it," my dad told me, trying to change my mind. I could hear the low sound of his car radio in the background.

"Just tell me where the shovel is," I insisted. He didn't understand that it was more than the fish that needed to be buried.

"It's in the small shed," he finally answered with a sigh. "Knock yourself out."

As I was digging, it began to rain. By the time I patted down the last shovel full of dirt, I was soaked. My long blond hair ran down my back in a wet, tangled mess over the T-shirt I had worn to school that day. I hadn't even bothered to get a jacket.

And then I stood in the rain for almost an hour, crying. I paced the backyard, wishing so badly that none of it was real, that my fish and my cousin were still alive. When I was finally

cold enough and cried out enough that I couldn't stand it anymore, I went inside for a hot shower. By the time my dad's green car bounced into our driveway, I had washed away any hint of grief.

"I just can't believe it was suicide," my grandma, Meme, said. Only two months had passed since Jarod's death. Her fluffy hair added at least three inches to her height, but, at five feet even, this still made her exceptionally short. It was hard to believe that my six foot three father and me – the lanky, thin five foot seven seventeen-year-old – had come from the same line.

Since my episode with the fish a month before, I had gone back to repressing every thought related to my cousin or his death, so when Meme brought this topic up, I tried to turn my attention somewhere else. It was hard not to listen anyway, though.

My dad was driving that same green car across the freeway in Oklahoma City, taking us to the mall or whatever frivolous shopping adventure Meme had insisted upon. I think he was just as tired of hearing about it as I was, but at least he humored her. "Why do you think that, Mom?"

"I've tested the length of the gun and it's not possible for someone to shoot themselves with it," she told us firmly, as if her words alone were law. Then again, she was always like that.

I wanted to tell Meme that there was a large hole in her "proof," which was that, at five-feet tall, her arms were much shorter than my six-foot-cousin's, but I stopped myself. The image of Jarod, long, thick arms holding a rifle in such a way came unbidden to my mind.

I shoved the image and the thought far down, deep down, hopefully to a place I would never see it again.

My dad didn't respond to her, so I assumed the conversation was over. However, Meme was far from finished.

"There weren't any drugs or alcohol in his system," she pressed, staring at my dad with her sharp, make-up heavy eyes. Jarod had been celebrating Fourth of July the night he had died, which in the middle of nowhere in Oklahoma meant a lot of drinking. He had also been prescribed painkillers for a four-wheeler accident he was in a few months before he died. The toxicology report showed neither in his system at the time of death. In my grandmother's mind, she believed it was impossible for Jarod to have killed himself without some substance clouding his thoughts.

"I know," my dad answered with a sigh. We had heard the details a thousand times before. Jarod had gone home after the Fourth of July festivities and gotten into a fight with Heather, his fiancée, who left after he had supposedly gotten violent. He called her to tell her that he was going to commit suicide, and when she got back to their home, he was already gone. There were no witnesses, so I could understand why Meme, as well as a few others, felt suspicious.

Nobody had really liked Heather after the first the time she cheated on Jarod – let alone the second time – but it seemed far-fetched to call her a murderer. Although I couldn't believe my cousin would get violent with anyone, I was certain that the police would have thoroughly investigated the scene.

"I'm going to talk to the sheriff again and see what he thinks," Meme announced, seeming frustrated that we wouldn't partake in her accusations.

I wanted to scream at her that knowing how and why wouldn't change anything, that Jarod would still be gone no matter how he left. I couldn't understand at the time that what she

needed was closure and what I wanted was to forget, so I put on my headphones and cranked the music up. By the time the car stopped at our destination, the subject had changed.

Any time a memory of Jarod surfaced, I would bury it in the back of my mind as soon as I could. It became something I did almost instinctually for years. Despite these efforts, memories occasionally leaked through. Three years after his death, my boyfriend, Mikey, and I decided to get married, and I remembered the first time I told Jarod about Mikey.

“He’s eighteen,” Jarod repeated after me, readjusting his baseball cap. “And you’re fifteen.” Jarod was only a year older than my boyfriend.

“He’s really nice,” I insisted.

“Well, if he hurts you, I’ll hunt him down,” Jarod told me after a pause. He collapsed onto Meme’s brown couch that she had had for as long as I could remember. “What did you say his name was?”

“Mikey,” I replied, sitting next to him.

Jarod put his feet up on the coffee table. “And he lives in Tulsa. I’ll remember that.”

After that, he made it a point to check on the status of my relationship when it had been a while since we talked.

Our first Christmas without Jarod, my dad’s family gathered at Susan’s house for the first time ever. Ever since her son had passed away, she seemed to be trying to spend more time with all of us, despite the fact that for most of my life she had been more of a floater of the family. It was also the first time my sister and I had received a gift from her in years. I might have been

touched if she hadn't spelled my name "Dieona" instead of "Dyonna." My friends joked later that she was trying to send a subliminal message to me.

When my grandfather on my mom's side had passed away a little over a year before, our first Christmas without him was spent almost like any other. Everyone knew there was a difference, that someone was missing, but the feeling was unvoiced.

I was under the impression that this time would be no different, but I was sorely mistaken. Jarod's headstone was discussed repeatedly since it would be placed soon. It would be in a jagged shape, featuring a photo with his hand held out in a welcoming gesture, a goofy grin on his face.

And then someone gave my aunt a present. It was a huge photo blanket of Jarod, a collage of photos from edge to edge. Meme got one, too, and this set off the tear fest.

I quickly excused myself to the bathroom, where I waited out the storm. In that time, I thought about anything, my boyfriend, my mom's dog, tenth grade English homework I still hadn't touched over break. When the living room sounded safe enough, I came back out. My dad had apparently noticed my long absence, because he came to stand next to me. He wrapped a tight arm over my shoulder and whispered, "It's okay."

It was obvious he thought I had been crying. Since I felt guilty that I had been escaping their tears rather than my own, I didn't correct him.

When Jarod and his girlfriend got their own house, my dad and I visited for the first time just a month after they got it. Since we could only visit a few times out of the year, this felt like an accomplishment.

For a couple of only twenty-one years old, they had a very nice house. Their living room had two plush, comfortable tan chairs and a large, three-person couch. Their coffee table had antler horns, and its dark wood matched the sleek flooring throughout the house.

I was seventeen then. I had no idea I was staring at the place where Jarod would spend his last conscious hours in a few short months.

We gathered outside to admire their large yard. The house had come with land, and Jarod and his brothers had spent the last month riding trails as far around as they could. Naturally, it didn't take long for everyone to want to pull out the four-wheelers.

"Wanna ride?" Jarod asked, straddling the red ATV.

"I don't know," I hesitated. I wasn't very good at sitting so close to people, and I had never ridden with Jarod before. If he was anything like his brother, Brace, he would tease me for being afraid.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Jarod promised, patting the hard plastic invitingly.

I settled on the back, wrapping my arms around Jarod's waist. I was afraid he would be mad at me for clinging to him, because Brace never liked it when I hugged him during a ride. Brace always made me hold onto the plastic railing on the back, which didn't feel very secure.

Jarod didn't say anything though. He revved his engine, and we took off. Heather rode behind us with my sister on the yellow four-wheeler. We flew through the man-made trails, whirled around trees, and over hills tall enough to make my stomach drop. After about twenty minutes, we pulled up to the house.

I leaned back, trying to tame my long blond locks into a manageable ponytail. I must have been smiling, because Jarod shot me an easy grin.

"We can go again, if you want," Jarod offered.

“Sure!” I said, settling back against him.

Now, five years later, I wish I could go back to that day and tell my younger self to hug tighter.

The second Christmas after Jarod died, I didn’t even visit my dad’s family. I was freshly eighteen then, and I was allowed to make my own decisions about where to spend holidays. Since I had skipped Thanksgiving with them, it was generally assumed that I would go to my dad’s family to celebrate.

When my mom asked why I wanted to stay with her, I said it was because my boyfriend Mikey had been invited by mom’s family to spend Christmas with us for the first time. Despite the fact that we had been dating for three years now, we had never had the chance to celebrate holidays together before.

It was more than that, though. I had lost the one person there I could relate to, and I had started to feel like an outsider. The year and a half after Jarod’s death, I had drifted further and further away from my dad’s family. We were too different in too many ways, like a poorly played game of Tetris. Although they would never admit it, I think everyone on my dad’s side would have agreed. Whenever I could get out of going to see them, I did.

When I didn’t show up for Christmas that year, they took it as a betrayal to the family. The fallout wasn’t pretty. Since no one asked me why I didn’t attend, I assumed that they didn’t care. When my sister came back, however, she handed me fifty bucks from my dad and said that everyone else had withheld their gifts since I hadn’t bothered to show up.

Later, I found out that my father had halved my present and that they had essentially demonized me the entire duration of their stay. Meme told everyone that I was “going through a

phase” while my dad said I “didn’t know the true value of family.” Meme even unfriended me on Facebook, a move I knew she took with the utmost seriousness.

After this, I let all communications with my dad’s family fade away, except for my dad, and our relationship was only ever rocky at best. I never tried to contact his family, and the one time Meme tried to friend me on Facebook again, I declined. In addition to losing Jarod, I had lost my place among the rest of them. I knew I had been growing further apart from them before he left, but he might have made it worth it to stay.

For a long time, I justified my reasons for trying to forget Jarod by thinking that he would have been the same as everyone else. Sometimes, I wonder what would have happened if I had told Jarod instead of Brace that I was an atheist. I told myself that he would have reacted the same way, that he would have been exactly like the rest of them, that we would have grown apart from each other, too, and that I wouldn’t have even liked the person he would have become. After all, Brace had become just like them, so I assumed Jarod would have, too. This was the only way I could cope, no matter the sacrifices. It was easier to bury someone I didn’t like rather than someone I loved.